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Rasmussen, Annette; Rasmussen, Palle

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Transformation of Educational Knowledge in Work Contexts

Paper for VET and Culture Conference

Gilleleje, August 2006

Annette Rasmussen & Palle Rasmussen

Department of Education, Learning and Philosophy

Aalborg University

Introduction

In Denmark the Adult Education Centres - *Voksen Uddannelses Centre* (VUC) are rooted in a tradition of providing *general* adult education. According to their traditional practice the VUCs have invited all kinds of adult people, employed as well as unemployed, to enter the VUCs and become participants in their courses. The courses have been advertised in programmes and information leaflets, but generally it has been left to the potential participants to seek out and enter a relevant course. This practice still applies but is now supplemented by another practice, in which the reverse process applies and specific groups of participants are targeted. That is, the VUC is seen to become the reaching-out part and have the particular focus on the workplaces and employees as target groups for their courses. On this background of increased cooperation between the trades and industries and the adult education centres, different positions and interests are at stake and makes it relevant to ask questions as to the character and direction of educational knowledge in this meeting: What kind of educational knowledge is at work, and what is to be learned?

In this paper we will try to illustrate the ways in which the meaning attached to education and learning is linked to the positions from which it is viewed, and to discuss whether general education is viable in the context of business cooperation and in-service training. We have examined these conditions in an ongoing development and research project whose main target, supported by the EU Social fund, is to provide general education for unskilled and semi-skilled employees in some of the fringe areas of Denmark.

Different types of educational knowledge

The understanding of educational knowledge and learning seem to differ according to which interests of society are given expression. Thus diversities of the societal groups are mirrored in different ideals of curricular knowledge, varying from the generalist to the utilitarian curriculum at each end of the spectrum (cf. Brint 1998:107). The generalists emphasise the general knowledge that is assumed to provide the learners with general education, to contribute to a personal process of development and critical judgement. Utilitarianism on the other hand emphasises education with a vocational content and aim, qualification rather than education, and skills that are more or less directly applicable to trades and industries.

It is often argued that not only do the differences of the curricula reflect conflicting interest of society, they also outline a hierarchy of knowledge according to which academic is considered better than non-academic, theoretical is better than practical, and abstract is better than actual (Young 1998). No doubt this hierarchy exists. A good illustration is the way young Danes and their parents perceive the choice between the different types of secondary education available in the “gymnasium” schools (offering preparation for academic study), the commercial schools and the technical schools. The “gymnasium” is perceived as the most prestigious type of schooling, the commercial schools as less prestigious and the technical schools as even less so. Young people choosing technical school will generally be aware that this is a less prestigious alternative, and they may argue that their primary school experiences had shown that they would not do well in the “gymnasium” (Andreasen et.al. 1997).

However, the perception of the value of different types of educational knowledge also depends on the context in which education is encountered. The choice of secondary education outlined above is made in a general social context, where the young people and their parents associate educational knowledge with lifestyles and life chances. Often, however, educational knowledge is encountered and valued in more specific contexts, for instance in the workplace. Here the criterion of relevance to the different aspects of the actor’s work situation (skills, job satisfaction, wage, career) often becomes much more prominent than the question of general social prestige. So the parent strongly wants his or her children to attend the “gymnasium” may strongly oppose the relevance of academic or theoretical knowledge when it is encountered in the workplace. Of course these contexts are not completely isolated from each other, and the perspectives may mix in many ways;

but the point is that hierarchies of educational knowledge manifest themselves differently in different contexts. This has implications for the VUC's attempt to target general adult education at workplaces.

Traditions and institutions in Danish adult education

Adult education in Denmark is a complex field encompassing different types of education located in different institutions (Olesen & Rasmussen 1996). There is a well-established division of labour, but also increasingly competition between the different types. The VUC development projects that we discuss in this paper must be seen in this context.

Adult education emerged in Denmark during the 19th century. The predominant tradition became the ideas and practises of the folk high school, boarding schools for young adults representing a popular and non-academic type of adult education connected mainly to rural communities. The educational philosophy of the folk high schools as formulated in particular by Grundtvig contained a unique combination of elements. While the high schools were to enhance young people's commitment to and competence in developing agriculture, the teaching mainly consisted in general and cultural subjects such as history, Nordic mythology, literature and biblical history. Christianity was part of the ideological basis but Grundtvig's kind of Christianity was more open and joyous than mainstream Protestantism. Grundtvig was highly critical of the established academic educational tradition and as an alternative folk high school teaching was to be based on the 'living word', i.e. oral narration and discussion in the Danish language. There were not to be any examinations and the students were to live-in at the schools so that they shared not only learning but also everyday life and its practical activities.

The folk high school soon inspired the establishment of many types of evening classes, and though the first half of the 20th century a liberal system of leisure-time teaching. The most important legislative framework was introduced in 1942, during the Second World war and the German occupation of Denmark. It established a principle of generous and almost unconditional state support for popular adult education and enlightenment of any kind. When a number of people assembled with a teacher and a programme or a subject, they were to receive state support. This kind of activity had been pioneered by the Workers' Educational Association, but all the main political parties established their own educational associations and went on to offer evening courses

in both practical subjects (like housekeeping), general subjects (like languages) and ideological issues. Immediately following the war, popular enlightenment was influenced by the great political issues; then followed a period with more apolitical training of skills and technically oriented teaching.

Thus the liberal principle of organisation introduced by the 1942 Act has made possible a mixed and ambiguous process of change. However, around 1960 new educational structures were created in two areas where the educational activities previously left to the popular enlightenment associations.

One area was general formal education, “second chance” education aiming at preparing adults for examinations. Much teaching in popular enlightenment had been in subjects also found in primary schooling; now government wanted to give adults the opportunity to pass the same examinations as primary school students and get the relevant formal qualifications. The adult students can study the subjects one by one and thus gradually piece together full certificates of education. This principle was first introduced in 1958, in the so-called “Technical Preparatory Schools”, and in the sixties it was extended to the upper secondary level. The background of this was that the level of required formal qualifications rose, both in the labour market but more clearly in the educational system. The changing occupational structure combined with the ideology of equal opportunity made many adults - not least women - try to improve their vocational qualifications; but admittance to many types of vocational education required formal qualification which these adults did not have. This was the rationale behind the development of general formal education. Originally the courses were mostly given at ordinary primary and secondary schools, but later they were organised in independent institutions, the present Adult Education Centres.

Another area was vocational training. This was also introduced in 1958 through an act on training of semi-skilled workers. In the beginning its objective was only to contribute to the migration of labour that was both part of and a prerequisite for industrialisation of society. The training programmes were the responsibility of the ministry of labour affairs, and the partners of the labour market - trade unions and employers' associations - were strongly represented in the management of both the schools and the training programmes. This state organised, co-operatively led educational system for unskilled workers grew steadily and assumed an important role in the development of

industrial skills and also in mobility and standardisation across the spectrum of work places and branches of industry.

The labour market training system reflects the strong element of corporatism in Danish industrial relations. It gives influence to the trade unions and it provides standardised qualifications which are important for workers' mobility and self-esteem. But the basic pedagogical idea in this vocationally oriented education system is mimetic: to imitate and to adapt the participants to the present labour market and to the qualitative character of working life.

Through these developments adult education in Denmark came to be organised in three main sectors: Vocational training aiming directly at improving the vocational skills and qualifications of adults, where courses are often developed in co-operation between the labour market partners. General formal education aiming at improving the knowledge and competence of adults in general school subjects, which in turn should allow these people to improve their level of vocational education or competence. And finally popular education aimed at providing adults with opportunities for activity, skills, knowledge and personal development in their leisure time. Although later reforms have modified and differentiated the educational structures, the three sectors still constitute the basic pattern.

It should be emphasised, however, that in the interests of adult students, and in the uses they make of their education, the difference between the three sectors are not all that clear. An illustration of this can be found in a survey of motives for participating in different kinds of adult education in the 1980ties (Jacobsen 1991). The author distinguishes between two major categories: Those attending courses because of work-related motives, and those attending courses for other reasons. The people who attended because of work-related motives constituted 19% in general formal adult education, 55% in vocational education, and 71% in job-related training (Jacobsen 1991, p 96). It seems striking that almost half the students in vocational adult education did not indicate work-related motives as their main reason for attending. However, the sector-specific aims, institutions and forms of funding do of course leave their distinct mark on courses as well as on students.

The cooperation between schools and workplaces

In the development project from which empirical examples are drawn, the VUCs establish courses in cooperation with private and public enterprises. The participants of the courses are employees, mainly low skilled. The work related courses are planned in cooperation between an educational consultant and a director of the company or department in question. Often there are several meetings before the course actually starts. At these meetings the conditions and curriculum of the course are negotiated and jointly decided by the company and the VUC. There are certain professional instructions within adult education that have to be followed, but even so the law is fairly open to tinting the courses and subjects in the direction of the company wishes.

When companies initiate such courses in cooperation with the VUC they might be motivated by a particular business situation – e.g. an organisational change or a new market situation. Maybe the company wants to reward a certain group of its employees and in this way adopts an HRD-strategy by letting them participate in education (cf. Rasmussen 2006:13). Or a company might experience a low of the season and instead of discharging people offer them a course, while they are short of orders. But the company might also be motivated by the hint of an organisational development. It is likely that the employers engaging his or her employees in educational activities expect that this will benefit the company in one way or the other. In other words they expect that the employees will learn something that will somehow lead to an increased efficiency of the company. Thus in cases where the employees have attended communication courses, the employers expect that this will improve the internal communication of the company.

The VUC on their behalf have organised themselves with business units that operate to marketing courses for trades and industries. The marketing agents are obviously focused on selling, i.e. on persuading companies that their courses will contribute to an organisational development of the company by developing the staff. In other words, in the process of marketing the individual learning of the staff is often put on the same footing as the organisational learning of the company. In this way the logic of the market intermingles with the logic of education, which is also due in other ways. To organise and sell courses that target groups of employees from the same company, the Adult Education Centres offer various “flexible conditions” that favour the particular needs of the company in question. Such flexible conditions include the situation (organisation and place) of the course, the timing and the duration of the courses, the reduction of the role (costs) of teachers, and a

more learner-centred or practical approach to learning. Course participants are also colleagues from the same company and sometimes the courses even take place at the company, but regardless of the location they are somehow *at work* while participating in a course. The modularised courses are usually compressed to the duration of one or two weeks and characterized by teachers playing a reduced role or simply being absent during some periods of teaching time. Thus, certain antagonisms between work and education are made topical in such courses, where the logic of learning is challenged by the logic of the workplace.

The logic of work versus the logic of education

Considering the personal role of staff and the role of course participants these roles are characterised by clashes of interests, or contrasting logics, between work and education. First and foremost there is the presence versus the absence of physical work. The working conditions of the unskilled and semiskilled workers typically consist of physically demanding and monotonous tasks, whereas the working or learning conditions of the course participants consist of bodily passive tasks (thinking, talking, and writing). Some of the unskilled employees emphasize that it is necessary for them to be able to mentally abstract themselves from the monotony of their job, and of course the opposite goes for the demands of the course, where they have to apply their full power of mental concentration. This accentuates the inherently different requirements, which the employees have to meet and move between, when participating in an educational course at work.

The above differences influence on the workers' attitudes to knowledge and on their approaches to learning. They exhibit a general scepticism towards abstract and theoretical knowledge. Not that they completely reject the need for it, but they prefer knowledge, which can be related to their daily lives, including both work and leisure time activities. So the content of the course has to have a strong practical dimension, if the workers are to make sense of it.

The aspect of time is also important, as time is viewed differently from the perspective of the worker and the course participant. For the employees time means money, as the conditions of employment in the present case are characterized by instrumentality. This implies that working hours are seen as the *means*, by which the workers earn their living – meaning that time is money. Accordingly time is measured carefully, in economic terms, and should not be wasted. Time is

sharply divided between working hours and breaks, between work and leisure time. Activities that do not directly contribute to economic accumulation of capital are easily considered waste of time, which also goes for the learning activities in question. They are up against this very utilitarian view of time investment.

Concerning the possibilities of communication with their colleagues, these vary greatly from the point of view of the employee and the course participant. The workers have poor conditions for communicating with their colleagues (due to an immense noise and time pressure), while these conditions are much better for the course participants. Thus the courses offer good opportunities of communication with colleagues, simply by bringing them together in a new situation. Sometimes it even provides the participants with new means of communicating, as the particular subject of the course might deal with this issue. This social aspect of the courses thus provides the participants with some informal possibilities of learning activities (Bottrup 2002:75; Rasmussen 1997:175), which exist alongside the more formal possibilities provided by the curriculum and the actual teaching. In this way the potential of learning might be extended by the amalgamation of the different spheres of education and work.

The modularisation and outcome approaches

Certain aspects of the work-related courses, such as the modularisation and outcome approaches, offer particular challenges to the education and curricular knowledge. Modularisation is defined as the breaking up of the curriculum into discrete and relatively short learning experiences that may or may not have separate learning objectives and assessment requirements (Young 1998:82). Due to the latter it is likely to be linked with an outcome approach, which asserts that the curriculum should be expressed in terms of measurable learning outcomes. Although this does not seem to be the dominant practice of the VUC at the moment, it is likely to become more dominant in the near future, concurrently with the modularisation and the reduced role of the teachers, as this brings a growing attention to the outcome of education – not least as the interests of trades and industries are given an increased consideration in the planning of courses. However, an over-specification of outcomes and little consultation with teachers is seen elsewhere (Young 1998:85) to result in a curriculum which monitors school achievement but provides few incentives for teachers to take responsibility for improving their teaching, as the separation of outcomes from learning processes

encourages institutions and employers to concentrate on assessment rather than investing time in devising new pedagogic strategies.

As also pointed out by Michael F.D. Young (1998:86) the outcomes approaches appear more relevant to adults than young people but have the clear limitations that they only refer to outcome, while institutions also have to make decisions about input priorities – for example the balance between class contact and open learning time and between formal teaching and learning support time. Young further sums up that the ways the modularisation and outcome approaches have been developed reflect a political context in which consumers have been given priority over providers (of qualifications) and make it likely that both strategies will be associated with low standards in practice. These are due to, first, a neglect of learning processes and, second, a tendency to devalue the professional expertise of teachers.

Transformation of knowledge

How is the educational knowledge contained in VUC school subjects transformed, when the subjects are modularised and tailored to employees in workplaces? It is necessary to ask as to which knowledge and which direction of the transformation - from education to work, from knowledge to action and experience, or vice versa. Apparently the transfer of knowledge from one sphere to another, in spite of all good intentions, does not happen just like that (Hviid & Keller 2006). This might reflect the fact that different forms of knowledge are at work.

The educational knowledge of the VUC has in principle been defined as a general and formalised knowledge. This is more or less identical to the knowledge defined as *academic* by Michael F.D. Young, according to whom the organizing principles of the academic curriculum are literacy, individualism in assessment, abstractness, compartmentalizing, and “unrelatedness”, which refers to the extent to which they are at odds with daily life and experience (quoted by Goodson 1995:128). On this background, but also concerned with the *content* of educational knowledge, Ivor Goodson (1995:132) argues for more systematic analyses of curriculum histories, of the ongoing social constructions and selections that form the school curriculum, to point out continuities and discontinuities of social purposes over time. In the case of the Danish VUCs it would be interesting to trace the development from original teaching of exactly the same subjects being taught in

primary school to increasing adjustment of the school subjects to the adult target group and further on to the emergence of new specific VUC subjects like “cooperation and communication”, which also allow some degree of vocational content.

An important aspect to consider is the consistency in the VUC’s self-understanding, teaching culture and externally presented image. When negotiating the content of their courses with workplaces and business life, the consultants of the VUC may adjust the curricula according to company wishes, so that the companies are promised something else than the *mere* teaching of general knowledge. Thus the consultants are likely to promote courses that contain both a general and a vocational dimension of curriculum, whereas many teachers will teach according to the general educational curriculum. When the consultants and the teachers of the courses are the same persons, this situation is less likely to arise. But when consultants and the teachers are different persons the “selling” and the teaching of the curriculum might be subject to inconsistencies. The problem can be further accentuated if companies do not communicate clearly the character of the courses to the participating employees. When groups of employees with limited formal education are collectively sent on a course by their employer they will generally expect the course to training with immediate relevance to their jobs. Thus the process of negotiating and planning the courses may easily produce imbalances between the practise of teachers and the expectations of learners.

On the side of the teacher, one possible reaction to such an imbalance is to develop arguments for the legitimacy of the course in the context of the workplace. In a case investigated by Dauer Keller (2006) the teacher of a course in “cooperation and communication” presented the course very much in terms of personal development skills and argued that such skills were necessary in modern, flexible workplaces. This can in fact be a sensible compromise between the general educational perspective of VUC subjects and the vocational perspective demanded by the workplace context. But at the same time it can be an intervention in ongoing informal struggles between management and employees over the regulation of work. During the course the teacher emphasized the positive opportunities offered for individual influence and development in the company, even though some participants maintained they had little influence. While the teacher’s aim was no doubt to empower the individual employees, her arguments were perhaps more in line with a modern management perspective.

Conclusion

In the positivist tradition, knowledge is seen as *fact* to be *transmitted* by teaching, which affirms it as something with an external reality rather than explaining it as socially produced. The notion of *curriculum as fact* expresses particular power relations between teachers and learners, and in society, which are designed to reproduce knowledge produced elsewhere by others (Young 1998:27). Taking the opposite view, *curriculum as practice*, implies that people acting collectively produce knowledge, that focus should be on teachers' and pupils' classroom practices, and that teachers' practices are crucial in both sustaining and challenging prevailing views of knowledge and curriculum (ibid.). Both views of the curriculum however, as argued by Young, tend to obscure the political and economic character of education and, indirectly, contribute to the very division between theory and practice. Young's argument raises the general question whether theory and practice can and should be combined directly (Saugstad 2001), but it will not be pursued here. Our purpose in this paper has been to illustrate and discuss transformations of educational knowledge in movements between a certain type of curriculum as fact (teaching in general formal adult education) and a certain type of curriculum as process (teaching employees in workplace contexts).

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